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ABSTRACT

The ideas and techniques of post-modernist art and the imagist theatre represent an important preparatory stage in the revival of poetic drama. During the 1960s and early 1970s, a number of experimental companies rebelled against the realism of the American theatre and began to produce works that stressed emotional authenticity in acting, active audience participation, and improvisation over written texts. While exploring the feelings beneath language, these companies neglected the craft of language. In recent years a number of artists have combined the innovative boldness of the previous avant garde with a renewed respect for formalist ideas and craftsmanship. One of the more outstanding results of their efforts, the Theatre of Images, at once involves the audience and draws attention to the methods of manipulating audience response through such techniques as abrupt changes in mood and highly stylized characterization. Post-modernist theatre also uses myth, metaphor, and allegory to create a shared body of knowledge between spectators and audience or to establish an ironic contrast with popular culture. Although with its reduction of discursive speech and the mimetic function of the actor, imagist theatre at times becomes overly abstract, it does represent a significant step in the recreation of poetic drama. (MM)

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In Search of a Poetic Drama for the Post-Modernist Age

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By the end of the nineteenth century poetic drama, once the dominant mode of all serious playwrighting, was synonymous with closet drama: a purely literary form with no relation to either the actual life or stage of its time. Like poetry itself, poetic drama was now a silent art — an art that existed on the printed page but not on the tongue.

The decline of poetic drama to closet drama coincided with the development of naturalism as the most vital new force in theatre. As we know, naturalism was based upon an effort by dramatists to apply scientific principles and methods in their work. In its most extreme forms naturalism aimed at reproducing life upon the stage with strict objectivity. This led to an exclusion of the artist's personal vision or attitude towards life. Poetry, as the traditional means by which personal utterance is most powerfully expressed, was virtually banned by the naturalists as too obvious an organization of language.

Henrik Ibsen viewed himself as a poet and, with his intense moral zeal, an enemy of naturalism. It is arguable that his most effective play is the tragic-comedy, "Peer Gynt," written in verse early in his career in 1867. Yet Ibsen's reputation rests largely upon the realistic dramas that he wrote between 1877 and 1886 in which he lacerated the prejudices, pretensions and hypocrisies of bourgeois society. By the time he wrote these plays Ibsen

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had come to reject verse as "injurious to dramatic art." Ibsen went so far as to proclaim that it was "improbable that verse will be employed to any extent worth mentioning in the future."

Ibsen's views have been reflected by dramatists, directors and critics on down to the present day. The psychological realism, linear plot and colloquial speech wrought to perfection by Ibsen have provided a model for modern dramatists as seductive as were the plays of Shakespeare to his would-be successors in the field of poetic drama.

Ironically, even though Ibsen's dramatic intention was satiric, by placing the middle-class drawing room and middle-class characters squarely in the center of his stage picture he, in effect, pandered to the taste of his audience, thereby confirming their blinkered notion that reality exists solely on an objective, materialistic plane. Thus imagination was all but driven from the stage. The sheer popularity of realism as a dramaturgical form and way of seeing the world has been the greatest single obstacle to the revival of poetic drama in our century.

Nowhere has the influence of realism been more pervasive than in the American theatre. This is reflected in the training methods of our conservatories and drama departments, the repertoire of our major professional theatres, the predilections of our critics and the taste of our mainstream audiences.

In recent years, however, there has been a reactionary movement to realism that, although still far from occupying a dominant position in American theatre, nonetheless promises some exciting developments

as we move into the next to last decade of the twentieth century. My purpose in this paper is to trace the development of this experimental movement as it moves into a post-modernist phase and, as I see it, may be preparing the way for a revival of poetic drama in the classical traditions of the past.

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Some forty years ago the brilliant designer, Robert Edmund Jones, issued a plea for American theatre artists to turn away from the realistic forms that had dominated the stage since Ibsen. Jones argued that the American theatre had grown up on a "photographic basis", but that film had superseded this function: "nothing can be so photographic as a photograph, especially when that photograph can move and speak". The challenge of film could only be met if theatre rejected literalness and the illusion of reality. "What we are now interested in is not illusion but allusion, and allusion to the most magical beauty," said Jones. To illustrate the kind of theatre he had in mind Jones cited verse passages and scenes from the plays of Shakespeare, Yeats and the Japanese Noh.

Jones' ideas on the reform of the American theatre were echoed by the poet Archibald Macleish. Macleish attacked realism for its concentration on the surface actions of life and consequent superficiality. "Realistic theatre is never anything more than description, detailed, precise and painstaking, but description nonetheless. The underlying reality, which all but the most cynical of us must believe to exist, is nowhere divulged and nowhere made visible." Macleish was careful, however,

to reject the sentimental notion of dramatic poetry as merely a kind of decorated prose. "Poetry is not ornament, is not flowers, is not the pumping up of language with metaphors, is not a lovely embroidered cover drawn across a dirty fact, is not a charm to make the mind forget, is not a paint, an enamel, a veneer. Poetry is revelation... Its essence is precision, but precision of the emotions, not the mind. Its quality is to illuminate from within, not to describe from without. Its language is not communication but experience." Making an obvious reference to the turgid dramaturgy exhibited in the verse plays of Maxwell Anderson, Macleish concluded his essay with an extraordinarily prophetic and challenging statement: "If ever a true poetic drama is written for the modern stage it will make palpable and real what has never been palpable in our time. That it may, in the process, destroy the modern stage is a possibility which those who talk so pleasantly of the theatre's need for poetry would do well to ponder."

The revolutionary ideas voiced by Jones and Macleish did not begin to come to fruition until the late 1960s when, inspired by the example of Jerzi Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre and the Living Theatre under the direction of Julian Beck and Judith Malina, a number of experimental companies developed with the avowed purpose of breaking the stranglehold of realism on the American theatre. Given its subsequent history, it is ironic that the Living Theatre was originally noted for its commitment to poetic drama. Productions during the 1950s included works by Lorca, Eliot, Auden,

Racine and Yeats as well as American poets such as Gertrude Stein, John Ashberry and William Carlos Williams. By the mid-sixties, however, the Becks scorned the playwright as an oppressive enemy of free creative expression. Echoing Antonin Artaud, the philosophical father figure of the new theatre movement, the Becks cried "Burn the texts", "Excellent form is a lie" and turned their energies toward collective creations evolved through improvization in which theatre, politics and the communal life styles of the performers were viewed as synonymous. In 1968 the Living Theatre returned to the United States following a voluntary exile in Europe and confounded many of their previous admirers with a series of productions that preached non-violence yet violently assaulted the intelligence, esthetic sensibility and, in some instances, physical well-being of their audiences.

Other ensemble groups followed the lead of the Living Theatre in stressing emotional authenticity rather than professional training and active rather than vicarious participation by the audience. But perhaps the outstanding characteristic of the ensemble companies was their aversion to written texts. Playwrights, if they were involved at all, were generally considered little more than voting members of the collective. Richard Shechner went so far as to claim that the traditional function of the playwright as the prime mover in the theatre was finished.

The American experimental theatre of the sixties and early seventies was, in many respects, a transference of surrealist ideas into an American context. Like the surrealists, the theatre companies and playwrights of the American avant-garde deliberately shattered most of the conventions

on which modern drama has been based in order to create what one critic described euphorically as "mind-blowing beyond-the-rational insight into the human soul". The experimental movements succeeded in undermining realism as the dominant force in the American theatre. But, like the surrealists, little work of lasting dramatic value was created, for what was ignored in the excitement of revolutionary change was a sufficient regard for the function of intellect or the craft of language.

Without question, the theatre of the twentieth century needed to rediscover an awareness of the fact that poetic language, if it is to be fully resonant, cannot exist in isolation from the non-verbal arts. The very word poet in classical times often involved the twofold character of poet and musician. Poetry was thus originally intended to be sung or chanted, a tradition that Dylan Thomas, the Russian poet Eugenii Yetvushenko, Alan Ginsberg, Robert Bly and Lawrence Ferlinghetti have reinstituted with considerable success. This tradition was kept alive, though usually in a debased form, in musical comedy, which has been no small part of its popular appeal. We tend to forget that a large part of the popular appeal of the theatre of the ancient Greeks, the Orient and Shakespeare was also due to a musical delivery of verse within a highly theatrical context.

Obviously the American theatre experimentalists of the sixties and early seventies were on the right track in striving to provide an exciting aural and visual context for language and in their efforts to give fuller expression to the connotative as well as denotative or literal, meaning of words. Too often, however, their exploration of the gut impulses be-

neath language resulted in abstract sound and movement patterns that were of value in actor training and in the rehearsal process but failed to communicate anything of significance in performance. It is interesting to note that the most memorable productions of the ensemble companies--the Open Theatre's staging of Jean-Claude Von Itallie's "American Hurrah", The Manhattan Project's adaptation of "Alice in Wonderland" under the direction of Andre Gregory, Lee Breur's interpretation of a series of Beckett plays with Mabou Mines, Richard Schechner's production of Brecht's "Mother Courage" and even the productions of Jerzi Grotowski--were all based on texts with a strong life of their own. Thus these productions from their very inception were provided with an intellectual coherence and form. With rare exceptions, such as the stunning Greek Trilogy staged by Andrei Serban at the La Mama Experimental Theatre in 1974, most of the experimental work in the direction of poetic drama degenerated into a hybrid mixture of poor man's dance and poor man's music.

The unusual success of Serban's production was due chiefly to his extraordinary visual imagination as expressed in collaboration with the equally brilliant musical talents of Elizabeth Swados. One of the most electrifying moments I have ever experienced in the theatre occurred in Serban's staging of "Electra" when Aegisthus made his first appearance and moved down a flight of stairs with a live snake twined around his neck towards Electra, who herself carried a white dove on her shoulder. As the two actors approached one another across the vast space that served as a playing area their voices rose and fell in a barbaric, gutteral chant sung in ancient Greek. The effect was utterly primal. As in opera, no verbal cognition was necessary and would, in fact, have impeded our response to the stark emotional power of the action.

The entire production unfolded in a similar manner as the plays were stripped to their bare essentials and staged as a series of Jungian archetypal images. The action was accompanied throughout by a score ranging from solo voice to polyphonic choral singing, from a complex of instruments including the gamelon and hand bells to percussive sounds on wood blocks. It was impossible to avoid being caught in the spell cast by the performance. But as I left the theatre I found myself only partially satisfied. What makes the original plays great drama as well as great theatre is their characters, their language (as understood in our own tongue) and their linkage of poetry with inner action. Serban's production moved me as I have rarely been moved in the theatre, but my response was almost entirely on an emotional, even unconscious, level. One half of what T.S. Eliot has termed a double pattern of action -- the dialetic between conscious and unconscious modes of perception -- that is an integral part of authentic poetic drama had been removed, and I felt cheated as a result.

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The primary failing of the American experimental theatre during the sixties and early seventies was not merely the lack of technique, particularly in characterization and verbal expressiveness. Those were only the outward symptoms of a much deeper lack that, as with much avant garde art of the twentieth century, was rooted in basically false assumptions about the nature of the human personality. Anton Ehrenzweig in his brilliant study of the psychology of creativity, "The Hidden Order of Art", has argued that prior to this century art did not exhibit an open conflict between surface

and depth sensibilities. Western art historically has depended on conventional "schemata" existing in an unbroken tradition over several centuries. According to Ehrenzweig, the "sanity" of this tradition resided in its openness to rational analysis which allowed for the continual possibility of modification or even radical change. Ironically, the persistent attacks of avant garde artists on reason have prevented newer traditions from emerging and then being assimilated by both spectators and the artists themselves. Thus the recurrent upheavals in modern art have tended to destroy the children of the new movements almost as soon as they were born. Moreover, the assaults on reason have, from a psychological standpoint, been self-destructive, resulting in the development of fragmented and even schizoid artistic personalities. This is because the conscious mind, or ego, violently repels attacks on its dominant function within the psyche. Ehrenzweig believes that the themes of modern art mirror these schizoid tendencies in their obsession with death and destruction, their hatred of life and the human condition itself.

With rousing manifestos modern art has sought to sweep aside all pre-existing art as no longer meaningful. This hubris now has worn thin. In recent years there has been a determined effort by a number of artists to define and articulate a new, still very unsure, traditionalism, a new reverence for older values that their predecessors thought had been destroyed forever. In the theatre this post-modernist esthetic has led to a revival of interest in the classics as well as the emergence of several artists who combine the innovative boldness of the previous avant garde with a renewed respect for formalist ideas and craftsmanship.

In the theatre, perhaps the most outstanding example of the post-modernist aesthetic is the movement known as the Theatre of Images. With its emphasis on powerful visual and aural effects as distinct from language, imagist theatre would appear to be a revival of the anti-literary, anti-rational poetry of the theatre advanced by Cocteau and the surrealists. On closer examination, however, it becomes evident that the work of artists like Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Meredith Monk and Lee Breuer embodies many of the basic premises, attitudes and techniques of classical poetic drama.

One of the first things to note is that imagist theatre both demands and evokes an extremely high intellectual involvement from the spectator. This is in vivid contrast to the aggressively emotional, space-invading experimental theatre of the sixties. It also contrasts with the passive total surrender to the stage illusion demanded by realistic theatre as symbolized by the darkened auditorium with its picture-frame proscenium arch. As in the poetic theatre of ancient Greece and the Orient, imagist theatre strives to engage the spectator's attention primarily through the presentation of a series of extraordinarily refined and evocative dramatic images. Always however, an esthetic distance is preserved so as to induce a state of contemplation rather than total empathy.

This distancing process is most evident in characterization. Instead of representing psychologically motivated characters with whom the audience is expected to identify, performers in the Theatre of Images either function recognizably as themselves or present highly stylized versions of characters in the form of animals with certain human qualities or through the medium of puppets. The effect of these presentational devices is to focus the

audience's attention as much on the way in which a story is being told or a metaphysical situation being explored as on the story or situation in themselves. Thus, by emphasizing form as distinct from content, theatre is brought closer to the pure condition of music, the visual arts, mime and modern dance.

Many of the same devices as well as the underlying reasons for their use are found in the performance techniques of classical poetic drama. The purpose of masks in Greek and Oriental theatre was not only to heighten the theatrical effect but to emphasize the archetypal qualities of the characters and the corresponding mythopoëia dimension of the themes being explored. This idea was reinforced by having the same actor play several roles simply by changing masks. A similar effect was realized in the Greek, Oriental and Elizabethan theatres by having female roles performed by male actors. While the Elizabethan theatre was more representational than Greek or Oriental theatre, recent scholarship indicates that Elizabethian actors employed many more formalized conventions in the way of movement, gesture, make-up and speech than was previously realized. The effect of these conventions was, as Gordon Craig noted, to create "a visible expression of the poetic spirit" or inner life of man.

Another technique borrowed from classical poetic drama by the Theatre of Images is that of exploring the action from multiple perspectives. In Lee Breuer's "Red Horse Animation" for instance, the story of the life of a horse is told by a chorus. The actors in the chorus not only portray the horse both physically and vocally but, as in the Greek and Oriental theatre, express and comment on his inner reactions to experience. Over and above all of this, the chorus expresses Breuer's ideas, as the author, on the epistomological process of learning through a continual dialectic between

the conscious and unconscious mind. In "A Prelude to a Death in Venice", - the central character is a puppet manipulated, in the tradition of Japanese Bunraku theatre, by an actor in full view of the audience. Both the actor and the puppet are, in turn, manipulated by the sound system, all of these "characters" again functioning explicitly as stand-ins for the author.

In the work of Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson and Meredith Monk, we find a similar effort to present the action on several visual and aural planes at once. The very process of assimilating and then combining a variety of fragmented images into a syncretistic whole becomes, as in the act of reading poetry, an essential part of the esthetic experience enjoyed by the audience. Psychologically, this process is equivalent to bringing the undifferentiated contents of the unconscious mind into conscious focus. Unlike conventional realistic drama, there is no condescension towards the audience. The tacit assumption is that people are capable of doing many things at once, capable of projecting a personal meaning onto the screen provided by the dramatic action, capable, in effect, of completing the performance in their own heads.

Richard Foreman describes his art as being specifically concerned with "the problem and structure of consciousness". He views conventional realistic drama as "an unconscious means of reinforcing emotional orientation towards security goals". Such an art is not interesting to someone who wants to understand and see things as they actually are in momentary and unique instances. The subject matter of Foreman's theatre pieces is the creative process itself. Foreman often takes an active role

in his pieces, seated in the front row of the audience and operating a tape recorder by means of which he deliberately draws the attention of the audience to the techniques being employed to manipulate their responses.

Robert Wilson's work also deliberately draws attention to the conscious and unconscious dialectic involved in responding to art of a highly poetic nature. In the tradition of Oriental theatre Wilson employs reiterative chants, hieratic movement patterns and an intensive slowing down of the action in order to induce an almost trance-like state of mind in the spectator. Yet just as soon as that meditative state is evoked the mood is deliberately broken in order to shock the spectator into a renewed awareness of where he is and what he is actually experiencing. From time to time Wilson mimics the very tendency of spectators to drop out of his marathon spectacles. "I KNOW IT AIN'T CRAZY BUT I'M GOING TO THINK ABOUT IT AS SOON AS I GET OUT OF HERE," shouts a character in "A Letter from Queen Victoria." A simple statement like "I SAVE TIME" becomes increasingly ironic--hence intellectually provocative--as it is repeated throughout the piece. Occasionally, an explicit theme line ("YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN") emerges only to dissolve into an abstract tonal pattern made up of seemingly disconnected words and phrases. Wilson's plays are not only about but also an experience of the human struggle in cosmic time and space. Gradually, they succeed in breaking down the mind's reliance on linear, causal progression in order to induce an almost Zen-like heightened consciousness of the nowness of being.

Myth, metaphor and allegory are other traditional poetic devices

employed by post-modernist artists to create theatre pieces intended to extend the boundaries of consciousness and thereby break down the barriers that divide people from one another. More often than not the mythic element in the work of the Theatre of Images as well as dramatists like Sam Shepard and Michael McClure is based upon popular culture: legendary material derived from tales of the Wild West and Hollywood movies, including gangster films, horror films, science fiction and romantic epics. Other sources include comic books, animated cartoons, the idiom of country and rock music and television. One advantage of drawing upon the mythology of popular culture is that, as Robert Brustein observes, it provides immediate access to a storehouse of knowledge shared by audience and artist alike. This enables the dramatist to dispose of the illusionistic settings and extended expositional scenes of realistic dramaturgy in order to explore his subject with greater imaginative freedom. Thus it is possible, as Robert Edmund Jones suggested, to create a theatre of allusion in which the action possesses the ambiguous resonance of poetic metaphor.

Dramatists from Greek and Roman times and the Renaissance on down to Cocteau, Eliot, Anouilh and Sartre have employed classical myths in order to create an ironic contrast with their own culture. Post-modernist artists have given this idea a new twist through the allegorical device of overlaying images borrowed from popular culture with mythic images derived from traditional high culture. What this represents, according to art critic Craig Owens, is a deliberate attempt to bridge the gap between the present and a past that might have otherwise remained foreclosed. Allegory as an attitude as well as technique thus exists as a positive response to the overwhelming estrangement from tradition felt by modern artists and society alike.

In post-modernist theatre this has led to the development of dramaturgical structures based upon the accumulation of details, each of which resonate both vertically and horizontally. An equivalent effect is achieved in classical music through the use of polyphony. Instead of striving to carry the audience's attention continually forward as in the linear structure of conventional dramaturgy, allegorical structure arrests the narrative flow, thereby concentrating the attention on a moment-by-moment apprehension of the art work. Gradually, the audience perceives all of the details, whether verbal, visual or musical, as existing both autonomously and in a close inter-relationship with one another. The ultimate affect is to create an almost mystical awareness of the correspondence of all the elements of the universe -- animate and inanimate, past, present and future.

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Obviously, it is not my intention to claim that the mere utilization of poetic devices by the post-modernist artists we have been discussing automatically transforms their work into a contemporary equivalent of classical poetic drama. To argue along these lines would be as absurd as to claim, as some critics do, that Ibsen, Chekov, Williams and Pinter are poetic dramatists simply because they happen to employ symbols. The fact remains that the actions of the plays written by these dramatists are based largely upon literal correspondences with objective reality. In comparison with the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes or Shakespeare, the dramaturgical form of these modern realists represents a reduction of the imaginative and spiritual dimension of the theatrical experience.

Conversely, my feeling is that imagist theatre errs in all but eliminating

discursive speech and in reducing the mimetic function of the actor. Essentially, this deprives theatre of a sense of verifiable lived experience that separates it from the other arts and provides it with its lifeblood. As a result, imagist theatre sometimes tends to be self-contained and overly abstract. It thus lacks the emotional engagement and passion of great poetic drama.

The point I am trying to make is that despite the drawbacks I have mentioned, the ideas and techniques involved in imagist theatre and in post-modernist art generally represent an important preparatory stage in the revival of poetic drama. We cannot expect such an ideal form of theatre to be developed overnight. As Eliot explained concerning his own efforts in this direction, "the creation of any form cannot be the work of one man or of one generation of men working together, but has to evolve by the small contribution of a number of people in succession, each contributing a little Shakespeare himself did not invent suddenly ...."

V

Herbert Read once suggested that, "The future may have in store for us a form of poetic drama that imitates not so much modes of action as states of sensibility." Regardless of where they have arisen and varied as the forms in which they have found expression, the basic intention of the artists and theatrical movements that have been the focus of this paper has been to re-energize the spiritual life of modern man. Excess of zeal, a wilful satisfaction with merely attacking the existing norms and, above all, a failure to keep in mind what Goethe called "the best part of man" has, at time, made the pathway of experimental theatre throughout the twentieth century a difficult one to follow. But, as the old Chinese

saying has it, only evil follows a straight line. In the tradition of Goethe, Blake, Emerson and Yeats, those revolutionary artists who have seen most clearly recognize that the norms must be shattered, not out of disparagement or resentment, but in order to create new forms that respond to the psychic hunger of the modern age.

Increasingly, theatre artists and audiences are coming to understand that realism is a dead end because it does no more than reflect the tawdry values of modern civilization. Similarly, didactic art can only diagnose our social ills without suggesting meaningful cures. What is required is an art that affirms both the potential and actual stature of men and embodies rather than preaches the standards of a better society.

It seems to me that the most significant aspect of the work of the Theatre of Images is that it reaffirms the ancient mystical idea that the true frontiers of man's development lie within the realm of the mind. By striving to awaken the imaginative capacities of their audiences, these artists celebrate what has always been the proper subject of art--a heightened awareness of the very process of existence predicated upon the belief that, in the words of Joseph Campbell, "the whole universe is a reflection magnified of our own most inward nature". The idealism evoked in the work of these artists is not an all-purpose panacea but rather a challenge to the ideal self latent in the personality ofevery man. In the highest tradition of the great drama of the past, it is a nourishment to the soul on its lonely, difficult journey towards individuation.